DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 231 FL 016 363

AUTHOR Maley, Alan
TITLE "I Got Religion!"--Evangelism in Language Teaching.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Savignon, Sandra J., Ed. and Berns, Margie S., Ed. Communicative Language Teaching: Where Are We Going? Urbana, Language Learning Laboratory, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983; see FL 016 358.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Objectives; Communicative Competence (Languages); *Educational Trends; Group Dynamics; Humanistic Education; *Language Teachers; Learning Strategies; Play; Second Language Instruction; Student Role; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

There is a risk of second language teachers becoming emotionally overcharged about innovative methods and techniques. Innovators promoting particular methods often claim comprehensive answers to instructional problems, and in spite of an apparent concern for scientific respectability, new approaches take on some characteristics of religious movements. But panaceas do not exist, and pedagogical movements should be kept in perspective. Among the positive results of new approaches are changes in the roles of teacher and learner, emphasis on group supportiveness, relaxation and reduction of threat to the learner, realization of the hidden capacity of the human brain, enhancement of the role of play in learning, changes in attitudes about error, emphasis on building inner learner criteria, and recognition of the value of creative silence. However, some of the approaches are also contradictory or inconsistent. Teachers must learn to exercise independent judgment about teaching methods and not accept them wholesale. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Studies in Language Learning (1983), 4, 77-84.

ED278231

"I GOT RELIGION!" - EVANGELISM IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

ALAN MALEY[1]

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Mainous

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

[1]Alan Maley is First Secretary with the Cultural Section (The British Council) of the British Embassy in Peking, People's Republic of China.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FL016363

INTRODUCTION

To avoid misunderstanding, I wish to clarify my standpoint from the outset.

1. This is not a criticism of any approach or method "per se." For the purposes of this paper, I am less interested in the way a given approach functions methodologically than in the fact that it exists at all. Also in the way in which certain, if not all, approaches develop along a roughly similar path of evolution, and share certain characteristics. In other words this paper is more concerned with the sociology of methodology than with its pedagogy.

2. I have drawn an analogy between the process and practices of religion and those of some methodological approaches. This is purely for convenience and should not be taken literally. No one is suggesting that teachers literally seek salvation in this way--though some I have known have come perilously close to it.

3. This leads me to my third point, which is that, although there are analogies to be drawn between the nature and complexity of life/existence and the nature and complexity of learning and teaching, they are emphatically *not the same*.

Put in its crudest form, I suppose what I am saying is that there are more important things in life than language teaching, and that anyone who becomes too closely bound up with language teaching risks adding an emotive supercharge to what is only one part of the life experience.

I quote from a recent letter sent to me by a friend who is into psycho-something-or-other approaches. "I had a fantastic success: out of a dozen participants, I had one woman burst into tears, one throwing up and at least one virtually falling head over heels in love with me--raving mad--you see the type. Well, I declare, teachers are an odd lot, and I'd rather deal with 100 students than 10 teachers."

Learning and teaching involve stressful situations. But so do getting a mortgage, looking for work, crossing the road, sharing a flat, having a baby, going to hospital and so on. We are perhaps in danger of over-emphasizing the threat inherent in learning situations, and forgetting that, for most learners, such situations are embedded in a matrix of other equally, or more, important concerns.

The degree of importance accorded to the threat of learning in the States perhaps reflects an important cultural difference between Europe and America. It would seem to most Europeans to be an exaggeration to speak of "laying one's life on the line" whenever engaging in a foreign language interaction. Perhaps we in Europe are inured to the hostility of the other. Our ways of dealing with other people are perhaps more clinical, less personalized. This is not to make a value judgment on the more participatory interpersonal type of event, but simply to draw attention to the fact that not everywhere do folk attribute equal importance to such events.

THE PROBLEM

Let us now look briefly at the mindblowing complexity of learning a foreign language. I feel particularly well equipped to do this just now as I have been locked in unequal combat with Mandarin Chinese for over a year. (This surely reflects an "incorrect" attitude.)

It is sobering sometimes to think of just how many interlocking and simultaneous psychological and physiological processes are involved: the need to recognize and reproduce comprehensibly the phonemic, stress and formal features of another system; to hold incomplete sequences in short term memory for long enough to make sense of them or to formulate chains of sound rapidly enough to interact before the discourse has moved on: to coordinate phonetic, syntactic and lexical systems simultaneously in what may be quite stressful circumstances; and to commit to long-term operational memory a multiplicity of rules and meanings. All of this, leaving aside the problem of an alien script, is a Herculean task for the learner. But perhaps even more so for the teacher, who is aware of just how complex and mammoth a job it is, and who has, additionally, to cope with the problems of dealing simultaneously with these factors in a number of learners who are all different.

Faced with this complexity, teachers quite naturally look for convenient solutions. These may take the form:

1. of avoidance behaviour (simply refusing to recognize that there is a problem). "I give them the basics." "Pronunciation is what I concentrate on." "If they have the grammar rules then they can make up their own sentences." "What they need is the grammatical framework...."

2. of abdication of responsibility to a published text book. "I use *Kernel*. It seems to be very systematic." "I swear by *Communicate*: It's the best there is."

3. of making eclectic decisions based on the range of choices available to solve a given set of learning problems. "None of these materials seem wholly satisfactory, but I use X for the listening part, supplemented by some of my own material. Then I use Y as a self study unit...."

4. of seeking salvation from someone who seems to offer a way to the Promised Land. The fascination that such figures or movements exert is phenomenal. (To cite a trivial example, my co-author Alan Duff, several years ago wrote an article entitled "The Use of the Telephone Directory in Language Learning." This was written up dead pan in an acceptable style and published in a journal in France. It was, of course, a complete send up. He nevertheless received a largish number of letters from enthusiasts wanting to know more about this new approach. We are all, I suppose, infinitely suggestible. For those interested in more recent developments in the art of spoof I recommend the article by Michael Swan and Catherine Walter (1982) entitled "The Use of Sensory Deprivation in Foreign Language Learning.")

It is then this third process, the flight to the enchanter (to misquote Iris Murdoch), which we shall be looking at.

THE BIRTH OF A METHOD

The effect of naming is magical. Once a thing has been named, a wall has been built around it which sets it apart and distinguishes it from other things with other names. (This may seem a trusim, but the act of naming does change one's viewpoint as Monsieur Jourdan discovered in '*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*' "*Vous faites de la prose sans le savoir*")

So it is too with methodological approaches. Once named, they seem to take on an independent existence, which to some extent at any rate, removes them from the control of their creators, and dispenses those who use the name from any but the simplest of referential relationships (for example, Einstein *is* Relativity, Freud *is* Psychoanalysis, Newton *is* Gravity--Gattegno *is* Silent Way, Curran *is* Community Language Learning, Lozanov *is* Suggestopaedia, Wilkins *is* Functions, Krashen *is* the Monitor Model).

The approach gathers about it a ritual set of procedures, a priesthood (complete with the initiatory courses necessary to license practice) and a body of holy write and commentary. As crystallization progresses, the number of those who have invested their belief in it increases, and room for maneuver is narrowed.

To survive, it is necessary to claim that the approach offers comprehensive answers to the problems, yet, given the complexity of the variables involved, it is clear that such answers do not exist. Seen from outside, the problem then is that the process of dialogue is inhibited. If discussion can only take place on the terms bounded by a given set of beliefs, then true dialogue cannot occur. Cross-fertilizing dialogue is precluded, as in the religion of Marxism, since the system is internally self defining and not susceptible to arguments which come from without.

With naming, then, there is a hardening of the intellectual arteries, a creation of a sort of orthodoxy which it becomes necessary to defend or justify. In this respect these approaches partake somewhat of the characteristics of religious movements.

1. They present a reductionist view, in which salvation is made available upon the surrender of critical judgment. Such views reduce the true complexity of a problem by offering a set of procedures for the practitioner to follow. While it is true that things are simpler than they are often made out to be, it is true that they are also, and simultaneously, a great deal more complex than we often allow. This is one of the great paradoxes of life. Approaches which focus on a reduced view of the problems are invidious because they divert attention away from more complex and subtle factors which might interfere with the neatness of their own solutions.

2. This goes along with a fairly authoritarian streak. As I have already pointed out, the act of naming isolates and makes it necessary to defend the fortress of faith against others. If others are right, we must be wrong--and we are *not* wrong. (I have seen very little propensity to engage in constructive dialogue between the kinds of approaches I have in mind. A glance at the bibliographies of their seminal works is sufficient. They contain only confirming instances.)

3. One also notes a tendency to exclusivity. Just as one cannot set up as a Roman Catholic priest without undergoing the period of indoctrination called for by the orthodoxy, so it is not possible to do Community Language Learning (CLL)--or Silent Way or Suggestopaedia--without the imprimatur of those who decide what CLL is. The "reductio ab absurdem" of this is that an approach is what those licensed to exercise it say it is. We should not be surprised at this (it is, after all, the basis however open to question upon which the legal and other professions rest), but we should not neglect to note it.

4. They are not open to refutation because they define and operate within their own terms. They can assert, but they cannot prove (a point I shall refer to later in connection with the definition of science). In just the same way, religious movements are able to assert with conviction that they offer a pathway to heaven--but no one has yet returned to prove the validity of their assertions.

5. The fact that demonstrable proof cannot be arranged often leads to a degree of obscurantism. As Dr. Gattegno states in the Acknowledgements to his *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages* (1976): "A suggestion which I could not incorporate in the text was to make the text easy to read. My style is found by many to be demanding. Perhaps this is because I write concisely and I avoid developments that readers feel they need but which do not suggest themselves to me." I have to admit that the result of such an attitude is a peculiarly rebarbative style (and one which in places does not fit the rules of English particularly happily).

   Curran's works (1972, 1976) are virtually unreadable without exegesis. One can accept that new ideas are sometimes difficult to express freshly using the existing resources of the language, but there comes a point when the style becomes an obstacle rather than an aid to understanding.

   Much of Lozanov's prose too is masked by the terminology of pseudo science (see, for example, Lozanov 1979). One is reminded of Lord Rutherford's remark that it should be possible to explain one's ideas in language which even the barmaid in the local pub would understand.

6. In one way or another these approaches are driven to make strong claims for their methods. (What justification for separate existence would they have otherwise?)

> Hence "Once I understand what students have to do, I am able to invent techniques and materials that help them be as good as the natives in what they are facing" (Gattegno 1976:vi-vii). Suggestopaedia makes similarly strong claims for items remembered after its courses and CLL for the depth of acquisition in its sessions. None of these claims can be substantiated in any way which would be acceptable to a researcher in the hard sciences.

The interesting thing about such movements/approaches is their concern for scientific respectability. But like any teaching/learning theory, they do not open to the principle of verification because the number of variables is too large to be held constant. Likewise they are not open to the Popperian criterion of falsifiability since they are not framed in such a way as to be tested. They are, scientifically speaking, neither true or false, since no adequate tests can be performed upon them. They have the status of *myth* rather than theory.

This does not mean that they should be ruled out as useless since, as we shall see, they have provided considerable insights into the language learning process. It does mean, however, that they entail an act of faith which is more closely related to religion than to science.

POSITIVE INSIGHTS

In case I may seem to have been indulging in negative criticism, I would wish now to emphasize some of the positive insights which such approaches have provided.

1. Change in the roles of teacher and learner. It is not inconceivable that the teacher be regarded as sole arbiter and controller of what goes on in language classrooms. The independent and individual role and status of the learner is fully accepted (if not always applied) by most theorists and practitioners.

2. The importance of group supportiveness. There are now few approaches which do not harness the group dynamic. The group is recognized to be more than its separate components. It also offers a security system for learning.

3. The importance of relaxation and the reduction of threat. There are few now who would contest the fact that we learn better when relaxed, and when not made to feel inadequate.

4. The realization of the hidden capacity of the human brain. Until fairly recently we were content to think that learning was an arduous and slow process. More recent approaches have shown just how much brain capacity is left unused in normal circumstances and how important the role of peripheral and subconscious learning is.

5. The role of *play* in learning has been enhanced. Indeed the value of the ludic functions of language has been rediscovered and reapplied. Learning is no longer synonymous with solemnly serious activity.

6. The view of error and its correction have been greatly altered. Errors are no longer regarded as sinful but are recognized as being a necessary and systematic part of the learning process. And the resources for correction (and self correction) are much expanded.

7. The importance of building inner criteria. Fuller realization has come about that it is the *learner* who is responsible for his own learning, and the teacher's job is to help him find his own way to do it best.

8. Creative silence is not now looked upon as a waste of time. We recognize the need for a period of incubation between input and output, and the need for learners to work over material internally.

The list is not complete, and not all the approaches mentioned embody all these points. However, in themselves these constitute a revolution in our ways of thinking about teaching and learning, and, even if we do not subscribe to all the tenets or practices of all these approaches, we owe them collectively an enormous debt.

CONTRADICTIONS

As I have already suggested, however, there are a number of contradictions or inconsistencies between these various approaches.

One has only to think of the carefully phased, step-by-step approach advocated in the Silent Way and the massive initial input of Suggestopaedia to see how divergent these approaches can be.

Likewise the emphasis on the learner as an isolated and independent striver in the Silent Way contrasts strongly with the comfort of the group afforded by CLL.

The Suggestopaedia teacher would be uncomfortable with the alienation of the Silent Way.

And the Silent Way teacher would be dismayed by the waste of energy involved in the group process of CLL. And one could go on drawing such contrasts.

While I think it worthwhile to point up these incompatibilities I do not think it detracts from their value as language learning paradigms (or myths!)--so long that is, as no *one* of them lays claim to total truth. While it is possible for there to be different paths to the mountain of enlightenment, it is not possible to accommodate such widely divergent approaches within a scientific framework.

RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION

My main concerns in this paper have been the description of a sociological process in methodology somewhat akin to religion, which I find fascinating, *and* the articulation, perhaps rather obliquely so far, of a worry.

Let me first recapitulate the process: a new prophet appears with a message. This is articulated in writ (books/articles) and ritual procedures (techniques), converts are gained, temples (research centers) are set up and initiation ceremonies (courses) evolved to license others in the practice of the new sect (approach). Proselytization goes on, and differentiation from other sects is strengthened.

Now to a slightly clearer articulation of my worry. This concerns teachers, especially young teachers. (I do not think one need worry about the effect of any method on learners--they are pretty resilient anyhow, and have a multitude of concerns outside the classroom which effectively insulate them from harm.) Teachers by contrast tend to be constantly exposed to the stresses of their profession in a way very few others are. The temptation for them to trade in their critical faculty for the security of a system of beliefs which offers the comforting certainty that one is doing the right thing, is therefore correspondingly greater.

Over the past 20 years I have dealt with large numbers of teachers of English as a foreign language, and the grail seekers among them have always been in the majority. Someone who is consciously or subconsciously looking for the magic method which will turn his stuttering students into golden tongued prodigies, will clearly not be too difficult to persuade that he has found it. But there is no such certainty. We know only that we do not know.

"As for certain truth, no man has known it, Nor shall he know it...For even if by chance he were to utter the final truth, he would himself not know it" (Xenophanes). And this is as true now as it was over 2000 years ago.

This does not, of course, mean that we should not continue to search for better solutions--provided we always realize that they are bound to be provisional, and open to criticism. But this has to be conditional upon the exercise of independent judgment in rapidly changing circumstances. And it is this which I fear is undermined by a too ready adherence to this or that system or approach.

REFERENCES

Curran, C., 1972, *Counseling-learning*. New York: Grune and Stratton.

_____, 1976, *Counseling-learning in Second Languages*. Apple River, IL: Apple River Press.

Gattegno, C., 1976, *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages*. New York: Educational Solutions, Inc.

Lozanov, G., 1979, *Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy*. New York: Gordon and Breach.

Swan, M., and C. Walter, 1982, "The use of sensory deprivation in foreign language learning." *ELT Journal* 36:183-185.